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Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1978), pp. 639-657
Published by: Rice University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/450196
Accessed: 28/07/2009 23:09

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SEL, 18 (1978)
ISSN 0039-3657

Representation and Ideology in *The Triumph of Life*

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". . . whom from the lowest depths of Hell
Through every Paradise & through all glory
Love led serene, & who returned to tell

"In words of hate & awe the wondrous story
How all things are transfigured, except Love"[1]
(472-476)

Shelley's criticism of Dante mirrors his own larger concerns. The immense scope of Dante's poem attests to the stimulus of a love whose object the same poem cannot represent or "transfigure." Coextensive with the impulse of human love, the imagination is infinite; but the figures and words by which the imaginative experience expresses itself are finite. The free imagination is imprisoned by its very act of *shaping* or image-making, particularly when its images are derived from the historical ideologies ("words of hate and awe")—in Dante's case, Christianity. The human mind habitually ignores or accepts its imprisonment, and worships the shapes it or other, similar minds have created. Hence, the *Divine Comedy* may exert its own ideological spell, in turn, over successive generations of readers.[2]

The deformation of the imaginative experience into ideology is both the subject and intrinsic poetic process of *The Triumph of Life*. The parodistic elements of the poem, Biblical, Platonic, Dantesque, epitomize its theme: "thought's empire over thought," a history of texts that forever recast the life of the mind into their own image. Criticism treating its allusive texture by reading backwards through the continuum of the history of ideas—the same continuum that is portrayed in the enslaved triumphal procession following the chariot of Life—understandably has not yielded satisfactory solutions to its dif-

[1]All citations of *The Triumph of Life* are taken from the new variorum edition of Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley's The Triumph of Life: A Critical Study* (Urbana, 1965).

[2]Shelley's concern with imaginative representation parallels Dante's warnings against the seductive letter of his fiction. See John Freccero, "Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit," in the *Yearbook of Italian Studies* 1972, pp. 1-18. For the Romantic appropriation of allegory, see Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles Singleton (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 173-191, and Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago and London, 1969), pp. 199-212.

ficulties; nor have recent studies which have re-allegorized its traditional literary *topoi*.[3] We cannot dispense with either critical approach in a discussion of *The Triumph of Life*, yet both are apt to obscure Shelley's more radical intentions. His allegorical figures do not point to some paraphrasable abstraction for which they have been substituted, but to their own function as imaginative representation. The two major "allegories" of the poem, the theophanic chariot and the female soul-figure who appears to Rousseau, are derived from two central myths of Western civilization, and portray their own progress from representation to myth and their eventual ideological domination over the human mind. In both instances, Shelley reduces the representational image to its lowest common denominator, to mere "Shape."

The shadow, the mediation in Plato's cave of the philosopher, is taken over by Shelley as a general figure for representation. In the poem's terms, human shadows stand for the figures cast by the imagination, reflections not of the outer but of the inner man. These and other shadows haunt the crowd of humanity that attends the chariot of Life.

> And others mournfully within the gloom
>
> Of their own shadow walked, and called it death . . .
> And some fled from it as it were a ghost,
> Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.
>
> But more with motions which each other crost
> Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw
> Or birds within the noonday ether lost,
>
> Upon that path where flowers never grew;
> And weary with vain toil & faint for thirst
> Heard not the fountains whose melodious dew

[3]Harold Bloom's complex and uneven reading of the poem in pp. 220-275 of *Shelley's Mythmaking* (New Haven, 1959) is criticized by Kenneth Allott in "Bloom on 'The Triumph of Life'" *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), 222-228. Bloom offers a useful summary of previous criticism of the poem. James Rieger, following Bloom's lead when he identifies the Shape who appears to Rousseau as the embodiment of Nature and finds the poem to be a brief for suicide, nonetheless makes some suggestive contributions in *The Mutiny Within* (New York, 1967), pp. 207-221. An eschatological reading is advanced by John Hodgson, "The World's Mysterious Doom: Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*" *ELH*, 42 (1975), 595-622. I have found Donald Reiman's discussion, which demonstrates some interesting parallels between Rousseau's narrative and the story of Saint-Preux in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, to be the most helpful secondary work on the poem, and my argument at several points incorporates his insights. Reiman's bibliography is exhaustive. See Reiman, pp. 19-86, 110-116.

> Out of their mossy cells forever burst
> Nor felt the breeze which from the forest told
> Of grassy paths, & wood lawns interspersed
>
> With overarching elms & caverns cold,
> And violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they
> Pursued their serious folly as of old . . . (58-73)

Sight supersedes the other senses but in a negative mode; man's obsession with the visual shadow alienates him from the synesthetic sources of the imagination, the fountain and cave which reappear at the beginning of Rousseau's autobiographical narrative (313-314). The passage distinguishes two forms of shadow-worship. The private self-enchanters are possessed by their own shadows. The public ideologues, greater in number and prone to social discord ("with motions which each other crost"), pursue or shun shadows cast by foreign objects blocking the sun, like the "eclipse" which is worshipped in place of the "true Sun" in verses 288-292. While this distinction separates the individual poet, Rousseau, in love with his own imaginative creations, from the multitudes who follow the chariot as the victims of the historical ideologies, it is, in fact, a distinction without a difference. Rousseau, too, is swept up in the triumphal procession, and, his own claims to the contrary, he is an exemplary rather than an exceptional figure. His detailed narrative will reveal the common structure of desire which leads self-enchanter and ideologue alike into life-imprisonment by the representational image.

As representations of an inner subjectivity, Shelley implies in the *Essay on Love*, the human shadows wrought by the imagination project an absence no more substantial than the evanescent cloud or lost bird.

> Thou demandest, What is Love? It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to waken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves.[4]

The void within, an unconstituted selfhood, initiates the desire for external self-representation. The imagination turns to "all things that are" outside the self in search of a sympathetic kindred spirit or mirror image that will, in turn, gloss or define the self. The operative word here is "all." The hunger of the self, the "chasm," is infinite,

[4]*Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque, 1954), p. 170.

and seeks an infinite object. This quest of love is as endless as it is vital to the human spirit: Shelley equates its cessation with a living death.

> So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what he once was.[5]

Here is the subject matter of *The Triumph of Life*: a death-in-life occasioned by man's surrender to ideological representation, whether an ideology shaped by the private imagination or derived ready-made from past thinkers. Prisoners of their own mental constructs, the self-enchanters "mournfully within the gloom / Of their own shadow walked, and called it death." A similar "deep night" enveloped the ideologues behind the chariot during their lifetimes ("ere evening").

> "And who are those chained to the car?" "The Wise,
>
> "The great, the unforgotten: they who wore
> Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light,
> Signs of thought's empire over thought; their lore
>
> Taught them not this—to know themselves; their might
> Could not repress the mutiny within,
> And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night
>
> Caught them ere evening." (208-215)

The "mutiny within" corresponds to the "insufficient void" of the *Essay on Love*. Unable to answer their own self-questioning—the question is the major form of action in *The Triumph of Life*—men attribute authority to representation and create ideology. Ideology, the feigned "morn of truth," fills the insufficient void, providing a system of beliefs that answers *all* questions. His infinite desire satisfied by finite representation, the ideologue is emptied of his capacity for love and imagination; he becomes the husk described by the *Essay on Love*, one of the chariot's victims

> whose hour
> Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe,
> So that the trunk survived both fruit & flower.
> (122-124)

These victims include Rousseau, the distorted root.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 171.

The gloom, the sepulchral shadow which surrounds the ideologue are properties transferred from their source, the chariot of Life.

> Like the young moon
>
> When on the sunlit limits of the night
> Her white shell trembles amid crimson air
> And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might
>
> Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear
> The ghost of her dead Mother, whose dim form
> Bends in dark ether from her infant's chair,
>
> So came a chariot on the silent storm
> Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape
> So sate within as one whom years deform
>
> Beneath a dusky hood & double cape
> Crouching within the shadow of a tomb,
> And o'er what seemed the head, a cloud like crape,
>
> Was bent a dun & faint etherial gloom
> Tempering the light.
>
> (79-93)

In the theophany of the first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet beholds "the likeness and appearance of a man" enveloped in a glory cloud and seated on the throne of the chariot of God. Shelley's parody substitutes a Shape whose contours seem to be defined by its shadowy cloak; another shadow acts as charioteer. Beyond an implicit attack upon the anthropomorphism of the Judaeo-Christian deity, the Shape is the *principle* of ideology, any representational shadow exalted into a god, into an absolute authority that exerts its tyranny over the mind and imagination. Although itself moulded by shadow, the false but exclusive light of the chariot forbids "shadow to fall from leaf or stone" (445) and will eventually deprive man, too, of the shadow-making powers of his imagination.

The Shape appears "as one whom years deform," and the burden of the dead parent in the moon simile suggests the historical dimension of the pageant which follows in the chariot's wake; the ideas and images of the past continue to cast their shadow over the present. But modern thinkers and their thought have no more claim to authority than their predecessors.

> "Let them pass"—
> I cried—"the world & its mysterious doom

"Is not so much more glorious than it was
That I desire to worship those who drew
New figures on its false & fragile glass

"As the old faded."—"Figures ever new
Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;
We have but thrown, as those before us threw,

"Our shadows on it as it past away."
(243-251)

With wonderfully ironic understatement, the speaker rejects the Enlightenment idea of progress. One shadow-figure replaces another in the historic continuum. "Paint them how you may," they still remain only figures. By worshipping the dogmas of ancients or moderns, the ideologue de-historicizes the figure, ignoring its essential character as timebound representation. For the figures, too, shall pass, unless they are restored to a ghostly second life as ideology.

The final section of the poem (480 ff.) depicts just such a resurrection. The deformed light of the chariot turns the shadows produced by the human imagination into ideological phantoms which return to haunt their creators.

". . . the marble brow of youth was cleft
With care, and in the eyes where once hope shone
Desire like a lioness bereft

"Of its last cub, glared ere it died; each one
Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown

"In Autumn evening from a poplar tree—
Each, like himself & like each other were,
At first, but soon distorted, seemed to be

"Obscure clouds moulded by the casual air;
And of this stuff the car's creative ray
Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there

"As the sun shapes the clouds—" (523-535)

In its *Aeneid* context (VI, 309-310) the simile of the autumn leaves refers to the unburied dead, an appropriate enough allusion here to describe the shadows which are not allowed to die their "natural" death.[6] The simile suggests the levelling effect of a common mortal-

[6]The human shadows distorted into phantoms have been identified by Paul Turner with the Lucretian *simulacra* (*De Rerum Natura* IV, 26-521), the visual images which

ity; here it depicts the original equivalence of the shadows ("Each like himself and like each other were / At first"). But the shadows become phantoms, the stuff of ideology; the "casual air" indicates the arbitrariness which privileges certain figures and grants them membership in the history of ideas/ideology. The phantoms in their turn exhaust man's capacity to cast off further shadows. When the cycle is completed, the phantoms' victims have lost the vital faculty of self-representation; under ideological domination, human desire and imagination cease to function. As the lioness Desire loses her last cub, so the followers of the chariot, shedding "mask after mask," enter a living death and fall by the wayside: "'Those soonest from whose forms most shadows past / And least of strength & beauty did abide.'" (542-543).

Rousseau is the poem's paradigm for man's temptation and fall before the representational shape. He appears as "an old root which grew / To strange distortion out of the hill side" (182-183). Beyond the significance of the husk image in Shelley's private symbolism, the *topos* of the human tree derives from a long literary history. Ariosto's Astolfo, Spenser's Fradubio and Fraelissa, the metamorphosed victims of Circean enchantresses, prefigure Rousseau who drinks from the cup of a Shape who is in some sense the daughter of the sun; we shall return to this romance configuration below. The *topos* also links Rousseau to Pier delle Vigne in Dante's wood of suicides (*Inferno* XIII). While Shelley may have in the back of his mind a tradition which made a suicide out of the historical Rousseau's death,[7] *his* Rousseau dies the metaphorical suicide of self-enchantment.

> "I was overcome
> By my own heart alone, which neither age
>
> "Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb
> Could temper to its object." (240-243)

---

mediate between objects and the human eye. *The Triumph of Life* portrays the consequences of representation, like the *simulacra*, assuming an independent life of its own. Turner, "Shelley and Lucretius," *RES*, 10 (1959), 281-282.

[7]Madame de Staël suggests that Rousseau committed suicide in her sixth letter "Sur le caractère de Rousseau," *Oeuvres de Madame La Baronesse de Staël-Holstein* (Paris, 1838), I, 45 ff. Madame de Stael's theory that Rousseau's death was caused by his inability to find a reciprocal love may influence Shelley's depiction of Rousseau's ideological "suicide" as an attempt to make the Shape come to life and respond to his desire. There is a discussion of suicide in the twenty-first and twenty-second letters of the third part of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

Like the damned sinners of the *Commedia*, whose different voices he will from time to time assume, Rousseau insists upon the personal uniqueness of his fall. But Shelley, like Dante, undercuts the "true confessions" of his protagonist; Rousseau's insatiable desire deprived of its object is the desire of everyman. Indeed, the pathos of Rousseau's narrative lies in its implication that man, even when independent of the historical ideologies, will become an ideologue unto himself, prompted by the longings of his unquiet heart.

Critics have compared the opening of Rousseau's narrative (verses 308-335) to Wordsworth's *Intimations* ode;[8] beginning with his April birth, "asleep / Under a mountain"—the metaphor is of spring sowing—the passage describes childhood experience preceding the moment of self-consciousness. The general outlines are similar: like Wordsworth, Shelley opposes childhood, a period of enchantment by nature, to the adult world and its historical pressures; the predetermined roles handed out to the actor-child in section 7 of Wordsworth's ode have much in common with Shelley's depiction of ideological conformance. But, ultimately, Shelley's is a very different version of the Romantic myth of childhood. The spell exerted by nature upon the child Rousseau not only blots out the consciousness of history—suggested by the similes of the bereft mother and dethroned king (verses 321-326), generational and political images darkly conceived in terms of loss—but it also denies the possibility of the Platonic and Wordsworthian *anamnesis* of a divine origin.

> "Whether my life had been before that sleep
> The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell
>
> Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep,
> I know not." (332-335)

The child of *The Triumph of Life* fails to perceive the divine glory in nature, because pre-conscious or unconscious, the child perceives nothing. This total oblivion is none the less positive, shielding the child from the burden of selfhood. As his Lethean childhood recedes, Rousseau "arises" into self-consciousness and must confront unanswerable questions of origin and identity. Only *after* the onset of consciousness does Rousseau discern a Wordsworthian "visionary gleam" upon the landscape, a moment which parallels the vision of

[8]Allott, pp. 223-224, attacks Bloom, pp. 263 ff., for reading the mountain and cave as a locus of childhood rather than of birth. I believe both readings are correct; Shelley simply conflates infancy and the childhood experience which precedes self-consciousness. Reiman, pp. 60-61, correctly demonstrates to what extent Shelley's depiction of childhood is anti-Wordsworthian.

the speaker at the beginning of the poem; the isolated speaker is similarly out of phase with the natural order, unable to partake in its refreshing sleep or morning ritual.

> As clear as when a veil of light is drawn
> O'er evening hills they glimmer; (32-33)

> a gentle trace
> Of light diviner than the common Sun
> Sheds on the common Earth. (337-339)

But the shimmering veil of visionary light is already the product of the imagination replacing and compensating for nature's spell of forgetfulness: Rousseau imagines a heavenly pre-existence. Consciousness and the desire which sparks the imagination coincide; in the terms of the *Essay on Love*, the human subjectivity attempts to constitute itself through self-representation, projecting its inner longings upon the outside world. Man turns back towards nature for the sources of the imagination, sources at first *synesthetic* and predominantly aural, but which are a prelude to visual representation.

> and I knew
>
> That I had felt the freshness of that dawn,
> Bathed in the same cold dew my brow & hair
> And sate as thus upon that slope of lawn
>
> Under the self-same bough, & heard as there
> The birds, the fountains & the Ocean hold
> Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air,
>
> And then a Vision on my brain was rolled . . . (33-40)

> "but all the place
>
> Was filled with many sounds woven into one
> Oblivious melody, confusing sense. . . ." (339-341)

After being immersed in the morning dew and the music of nature, the speaker, apparently an old hand at such imaginative experience, envisions the action of the poem. Rousseau's imagination, in its first and last action in his compressed capsule autobiography, creates the visionary "Shape."

In his pioneering essay, Yeats correctly derived the cave and flowing river, recurrent images in Shelley's poetry, from Porphyry's *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs*, which was translated by Thomas Taylor in 1789.[9] In Porphyry's allegory, Homer's cave (*Odyssey* XIII, verses 96 ff.) represents the avenue by which the incorporeal soul enters material generation. Shelley applies this Neoplatonic model to the man Rousseau and to his imaginative Shape alike, both of them born inside the cave. The Rousseau-Shape analogy structures the imaginative act—the generation of the representational Shape—in terms of the bipartite movement of Rousseau's emergence from preconsciousness to consciousness. The natural reverie of the senses which precedes the production of the Shape derives from the same natural enchantment which surrounds the pre-conscious child. When the Shape passes out of her cave into representational being, she parallels Rousseau's alienation from nature after the moment of consciousness. The image is the *secondary*, conscious by-product of the imaginative process. But the image's non-representational origins in an initial pre-conscious or subconscious stage of synesthetic reverie, precisely because they are non-representational, are as inaccessible to the mind as the oblivious state of childhood or a Neoplatonic pre-existence in the stars. Shelley portrays the "ineluctable modality of the visible" of the imagination, able to understand its own workings only in terms of its own images.

By simply reversing the analogy, the Neoplatonic birth myth itself may be seen as the reflection of the structure of imaginative representation. Such a reversal is already suggested by Taylor's translation of Porphyry.

> And souls insnared by corporeal love, and attracting to their nature a humid spirit, condense this watery vehicle like a cloud; for a cloud is nothing more than humour condensed in the air. But the pneumatic part thus condensed, through too great an abundance of humour becomes the object of corporeal sight. And among the number of these we must reckon

[9]William Butler Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" in *Essays and Introductions* (New York, 1972), pp. 82 ff. Taylor's translation of Porphyry is reprinted in *Thomas Taylor the Platonist: Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper (Princeton, 1969), pp. 296-323.

While Shelley appears to have known *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs* directly, his *poetic* source was undoubtedly *Paradise Lost* IV, 449 ff. Eve awakes, as does Rousseau, beside the cave and stream of Porphyry's allegory. In the waters she beholds a "shape" (461), which is, of course, her own reflection. Rousseau similarly perceives his self-projection in the Shape "on the vibrating / Floor of the fountain . . ." (350-351).

> those apparitions of images, which from a spirit coloured by the influence of imagination, present themselves to mankind.[10]

Porphyry's last sentence refers to spectres and ghosts, but Taylor's version blurs the distinction between the supernatural and the imaginary. The Shape, later compared to a ghost (428, 433), draws moisture about her and comes into being. The passage, linking the assumption of the cloudlike body to an erotic stimulus, is congenial to Shelley's concept of love as self-representation. It may gloss the earlier depiction of sexual love in verses 149-160, where the collision of rain clouds (155-157) appears to describe not merely a physical exchange but also the interpenetration of two projected subjectivities. The nexus of love and representation also accounts for the Shape's femininity. Rousseau's imagination, reaching out at the moment of consciousness for a transcendent object that will define his selfhood, confuses physical and metaphysical desire.

The seductiveness of the Shape is further heightened by her "metrical" components. The Shape's rhythmical dancing recalls the Muses invoked at the beginning of Hesiod's *Theogony*, who beat out the time with their feet.[11]

> "And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
> To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
> The thoughts of him who gazed on them, & soon
>
> "All that was seemed as if it had been not,
> As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
> Her feet like embers, & she, thought by thought,
>
> "Trampled its fires into the dust of death,
> As Day upon the thresholds of the east
> Treads out the lamps of night. (382-390)

[10] *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, p. 304.

[11] "From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon, and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring and the altar of the almighty son of Cronos, and, when they have washed their tender bodies in Permessus or in the Horse's Spring or Olmeius, make their fair lovely dances upon highest Helicon and move with vigorous feet." *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, The Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1926), p. 79. For the feet-poetic feet reading, I am indebted to Professor Paul de Man of Yale University. A second possible source for Shelley's airborne Shape is Homer's account (*Iliad* XIX, 92 ff.) of Ate, Delusion, whose delicate feet "do not touch the ground, but she walks over the heads of men, harming them." The Homeric passage is assimilated in the description of Eros in Plato's *Symposium* (195d). The Shape's destructive footwork may recall the classical goddess of Infatuation.

The Shape's "poetic feet" enhance her charms. Here, and perhaps only here, the poem shades into a specifically literary polemic. But the "rhetorical" fascination of the Shape is *supplemental* to her primarily visual attraction as imaginative representation—note the insistence upon "gazed" and "gazer." Her dancing reproduces or transfers into representation the aural charms associated with nature's Lethean reverie. Hesiod's Muses, the daughters of memory, bestow the gift of forgetfulness.

Rousseau's forgetfulness, extinguishing the thoughts and fire of his mind (verse 201: "the spark with which heaven lit my spirit"), reveals the latent negativity of the imagination which will turn upon itself and invite its own destruction. At her most captivating, erotic, and musical, the representational Shape is most dangerous; obsessing the mind of her creator to the exclusion and stamping-out of all other thought, she becomes its *idée fixe*. Yet the fault does not lie with representation *per se*. Like Macbeth's dagger, the Shape is merely the incarnation of desire, born of an inner want. Prompted by his unquenchable thirst for selfhood—his "insufficient void"—Rousseau willingly suspends disbelief; he attributes authority and truth-value to the Shape. In doing so, he creates his private ideology.

> ". . . as one between desire and shame
> Suspended, I said—'If, as it doth seem,
> Thou comest from the realm without a name,
>
> "'Into this valley of perpetual dream,
> Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why—
> Pass not away upon the passing stream.'
>
> "'Arise and quench thy thirst,' was her reply.
>
> (393-400)

Rousseau's question is his fall; the Shape's cup of Nepenthe is his apple. He refuses to acknowledge that the Shape is subject to the temporal boundaries of human representation; "pass not away" contrasts to the speaker's "Let them pass," addressed to the shadow-figures at verse 243. Rather, Rousseau chooses to associate her non-representational imaginative origins ("the realm without a name") with some kind of "divine" or eternal order of truth; he rebuilds the Neoplatonic myth which the poem is at pains to deconstruct. His shame indicates that Rousseau may know better, but his desire prevails, a desire to solve the riddle of his existence. Shelley, in the *Essay on Life*, recognizes the inadequacy of human representation to supply the answers.

> What is life? Thoughts and feelings arise, with or without our will, and we employ words to express them. We are born, and our birth is unremembered, and our infancy remembered but in fragments; we live on, and in living we lose the apprehension of life. How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being! Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much. For what are we? Whence do we come? And whither do we go? Is birth our commencement, is death the conclusion of our being? What is birth and death?[12]

> Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step towards this object: it destroys error and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation. By signs, I would be understood in a wide sense, including what is properly meant by that term, and what I peculiarly mean. In this latter sense, almost all familiar objects are signs, standing not for themselves but for others in their capacity of suggesting one thought which shall lead to a train of thoughts. Our whole life is thus an education of error.[13]

The second passage makes clear that Shelley's concept of representation extends beyond the written word; by a trick of the imagination, all external objects may assume representational qualities. Read together, the two passages offer useful commentary on the problems of *The Triumph of Life*. The necessity of representation arises from the desire to "penetrate the mystery of our being," a desire which is as inevitable as it is sometimes involuntary ("with or without our will"). But truth cannot reside in imaginative representation, which, when granted authority, only leads to error. Philosophy, conceived as a "pioneer for the overgrowth of the ages," would undertake the poem's quarrel with the history of ideas; Shelley's goal is the free mind, able to recognize the representational nature both of past ideas and of the products of its own imagination. The result is a "vacancy," which again should be understood in terms of the "insufficient void" of the *Essay on Love*. In asking men to expect no more from words and signs than the revelation of their own ignorance, Shelley asks them to accept that void, to accept the proposition that the desire for

[12] *Shelley's Prose*, p. 172.
[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

selfhood can never be satisfied, rather than to enslave their minds and imaginations to a fictive, representational selfhood.

Rousseau, however, refuses to live in a state of unfulfilled desire: he cannot repress his own "mutiny within." He plays Pygmalion to the Shape's Galatea,[14] demanding that this figment of his imagination come to life in order to remove the thirst for selfhood which attends human consciousness. The Shape's Nepenthe, like the forgetfulness induced by her dance, are negative substitutions for the oblivion of childhood. But the wish to return to a state of unconsciousness, free from desire, is as futile as it is regressive. Rousseau drinks with disastrous results.

> "And suddenly my brain became as sand
>
> "Where the first wave had more than half erased
> The track of deer on desert Labrador,
> Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed
>
> "Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore
> Until the second bursts—" (405-410)

The passage is crucial and difficult. Yeats helpfully suggests that the wolf symbolizes desire.[15] Under the influence of the Shape's Nepenthe—the first wave—the tracks of the deer, the inaccessible object of desire, are all but washed away. Left in their place are the tracks of the wolf, the image of desire, which I would identify with the Shape herself. Rousseau remains trapped in the mediations of his longing until he is overcome by the conquering chariot of Life—the second wave. Then the Shape, too, disappears.

The Shape vanishes because Rousseau has "quenched" his desire. His willing subjection to his Shape paradoxically destroys the very imagination which created her. Under the impact of the chariot's light, she fades away.

> "And the fair shape waned in the coming light
> As veil by veil the silent splendour drops
> From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite
>
> "Of sunrise ere it strikes the mountain tops—
> And as the presence of that fairest planet
> Although unseen is felt by one who hopes

[14]Rousseau wrote a "scène lyrique," *Pygmalion*. See the *Oeuvres Complètes de J. J. Rousseau* (Paris, 1824), II, 420-430.

[15]Yeats, p. 90.

"That his day's path may end as he began it
In that star's smile, whose light is like the scent
Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it,

"Or the soft note in which his dear lament
The Brescian shepherd breathes, or the caress
That turned his weary slumber to content.—

"So knew I in that light's severe excess
The presence of that shape which on the stream
Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,

"More dimly than a day appearing dream,
The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep,
A light from Heaven whose half extinguished beam

"Through the sick day in which we wake to weep
Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost.—"

(412-431)

The false light of the chariot is excessive; ideology, claiming to possess the whole truth, "illumines" all things and leaves nothing to the imagination. The Shape sheds her representational being, "veil by veil," anticipating the "mask after mask" which fall from the chariot's victims at verse 536. Like those literary figures, Christ and Socrates (verses 128-134),[16] the Shape returns to her "native noon," to a non-representational or pre-representational state figured by the invisible evening star.[17] In her non-representational, hence humanly unknowable, "pre-existence," the Shape can only be evoked through the synesthetic combination of the non-visual senses: smell, hearing, touch (the jonquil, the shepherd's lament, the caress) which we have already associated with the non-representational component of the imagination. But the representational power of Rousseau's imagination is effectively dead.[18]

[16]I am also indebted to Professor de Man for the suggestive argument that Jesus and Socrates share the Shape's representational status as characters in a fiction. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (New York, 1969), pp. 121-124, Marshall McLuhan cites a text of Thomas Aquinas which explains why neither Christ nor Socrates committed their teachings to writing, preferring instead a "higher" inspirational and non-representational mode of teaching. Either of these lines of argument is to be preferred as an explanation for Shelley's grouping together of Christ and Socrates than the suicide theory proposed by Bloom and Rieger.

[17]For the figure of the evening star in Romantic poetry, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Reflections on the Evening Star: Akenside to Coleridge" in *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York and London, 1972), pp. 85-131, esp. 91-93.

[18]The Shape's transformation into a "ghost of a forgotten form of sleep" may be paralleled in the final pages of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Madame d'Orbe declares after the death of Julie:

Yeats and, among modern critics, Harold Bloom have pointed out the tripartite hierarchy of light in *The Triumph of Life*: the star, the sun, the glare of the chariot of Life.[19] We are told that the Shape blots out Rousseau's thoughts as the morning sun puts out the stars (388-390); the same metaphor describes the loss of the Shape in the light of the chariot. This reciprocity, one stage of the imagination succeeding another, is already suggested by the initial description of the chariot.

> And a cold glare, intenser than the noon
> But icy cold, obscured with light
> The Sun as he the stars. (77-79)

If we are to understand this hierarchy, I believe that we must identify the Shape with her "father," the Sun. Plato declares the sun "the author of visibility in all visible things";[20] the Shape is the representational product of the imagination which supersedes the eclipsed non-representational star. If the star represents an "ideal" object of desire (the deer of the earlier simile), then the sun is the agent which gives that desire an intelligible representational shape (the wolf). The star and sun would consequently correspond to the dual structure of the imagination we have already outlined: the sun to its conscious, image-making functions, the star to its pre-conscious, non-representational "origins." In terms of the human biography, the sun, the adult, image-producing imagination, replaces the star, the synesthetic childhood reverie. Both, in turn, fall before the ideological domination of the chariot.

Even as he joins the other victims of ideology in their long procession in the wake of the chariot, Rousseau continues to proclaim his personal uniqueness.

> "—I among the multitude
> Was swept; me sweetest flowers delayed not long,
> Me not the shadow nor the solitude,

Non, elle n'a point quitté ces lieux qu'elle nous rendit si charmants; ils sont encore tout remplis d'elle. Je la vois sur chaque objet, je la sens à chaque pas, à chaque instant du jour j'entends les accents de sa voix.

Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse (Paris, 1960), p. 732. Julie, too, parodies Socrates and Jesus on her deathbed, p. 714: "je ne vous quitte pas, pour ainsi dire, je reste avec vous; en vous laissant tous unis, mon esprit, mon coeur vous demeurent." The Shape's demise into a *genius loci* may well reflect Julie's death, which as the self-conscious *Préface de Julie* implies, could represent the historical Rousseau's own deconstruction of his novel's central image of desire.

[19]Yeats, pp. 93 ff.; Bloom, pp. 270 ff.

[20]*Republic* VI, 509b.

"Me not the falling stream's Lethean song,
Me, not the phantom of that early form
Which moved upon its motion,—but among

"The thickest billows of the living storm
I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime
Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.—"
(460-468)

Rhetorically, his fall behind the chariot becomes a defiant suicidal gesture ("I plunged, and bared my bosom") instead of surrender to a common human lot. Rousseau's claim to exceptionality stems from his Romantic "originality."

"I
Am one of those who have created, even

"If it be but a world of agony." (293-295)

Unlike other followers of the chariot, Rousseau has not succumbed to the historical ideologies but to the creations of his own imagination. But Shelley, abolishing the distinction between the ideologue and the self-enchanter, finds the fault to lie not in history but in ourselves. The anaphoric repetition of "me" may recall the ubiquitous *moi*, the *moi seul* of the *Confessions* and the *Rêveries*. But the anaphora also echoes the speech of Dante's Ulysses.

Ne dolcezza di figlio, *né* la pieta
Del vecchio padre, *né* 'l debito amore
Lo qual devea Penelope far lieta,
Vincer poter dentro da me l'ardore
Ch' i' ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto.[21]

(Neither tenderness for my son, nor piety towards my aged father, nor the love I owed which should have made Penelope happy could conquer the ardor that I had within me to gain knowledge of the world. *Inferno* XXVI, 94-98)

At the moment he claims the uniqueness of his fall, Rousseau imitates the literary model Ulysses. Ulysses shares with Rousseau the infinite desire for knowledge which he claims separates him—the scorner of familial ties—from the normal run of men. And Ulysses is

[21] *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighiere*, ed. C. H. Grandgent (Boston, 1933), pp. 235-236; my italics.

similarly undercut: he is the *Commedia*'s exemplary figure of the sinner, the man who would slake his inner thirst not in the love of God but through his own human intellect.[22] Shelley and Dante both belittle the powers of the mind to know the transcendent object of its desire. Shelley goes one step further by reducing Christian revelation to just another human mental construct, to ideological representation; hence his quarrel with Dante, for whose allegorical mode of thought he none the less shares considerable sympathy. If Ulysses stands for all sinners in the *Commedia*, Rousseau, whose insatiable desire does not allow him to linger in the early stages of the imagination but rushes him to enslavement by the chariot, exemplifies the human ideologue in *The Triumph of Life*. When the self-asserting Ulysses must describe his drowning and shipwreck, he confesses that he was not the master of a fate decided "com' Altrui piacque" ("as it pleased Another"); Rousseau, plunging into the "billows of that living storm" in a metaphorical drowning, brings about his ideological death-in-life by merely yielding to the inevitable.

Rousseau's exemplary position lies at the center of the story-within-a-story structure of *The Triumph of Life*. In their respective epics, Ruggiero and Red Crosse listen patiently to the warnings of the enchanted human trees Astolfo and Fradubio, and then proceed none the less to fall to the same temptations of Alcina and Duessa against which they have been warned. So it may be with the speaker, who seems to imitate Rousseau point by point. Rousseau admonishes the speaker to abate his "thirst of knowledge" (194), but the speaker, like Rousseau, cannot stop asking questions. He puts to Rousseau a question parallel to the one Rousseau had made of the Shape: "'Whence comest thou & wither goest thou? / How did thy course begin, ' I said, ' & why?'" (296-297). Rousseau is the speaker's Shape, the figure of his visionary imagination, and the speaker appears to repeat Rousseau's own error of seeking the truths of existence from representation. But if Rousseau has fallen, and the speaker seems about to fall, the final say belongs to the poem's reader, who must deal with the outermost of its Chinese boxes despite evidence that it is a Pandora's box. For the story-within-a-story, if it reveals the fictionality of the poem, also implicates the reader in that fiction. If the reader's desire

[22]For Ulysses as exemplary sinner and antitype of the pilgrim Dante see John Freccero, "Dante's Prologue Scene," *Dante Studies*, 84 (1966), 1-25.

persists to fill in the blank space on the chariot where the Shape sits crouched in shadow, rather than understand it as a vacancy which only ideology can occupy, then he, too, may join the speaker at the end of the poem in a question to which the poem offers no reply.

> "Then, what is Life" I said. . . . (544)

The poem needs no sequel.

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